



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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## The Decision Makers?

by Barbara Termitiere

The scene opens in a hospital room. An exhausted new mother and her anxious husband breathlessly await their first chance to gaze at and hold their newborn baby. The door opens...in comes a committee of doctors, nurses and other hospital staff. Bewildered, the new parents look in vain for their baby... What could possibly be the problem? "Mr. and Mrs. Jones," one woman begins, "you know the baby you just gave birth to? Well, we professionals, who among us have over 200 years' experience in working with families like yours, have decided that the child you gave birth to is not the right child for your family, so we have chosen another child for you." A young intern then steps forward to present the startled new parents with their committee-selected son....

INCREDIBLE! you say. Who would put up with such an intrusion into their lives! Who would accept the decision of a committee in such a personal matter, no matter how much experience they have had! What's more: who would be expected to allow such an unthinkable event to occur!

The answer is ... ADOPTIVE FAMILIES. The unthinkable is, most often, their reality. A committee usually decides not only if they can expand their family but WHO and HOW MANY they can expand it to include .... THE DECISION MAKERS strike again!

There is a very basic problem here, DECISION MAKERS. If workers and committees make decisions, then workers and committees need to also be totally responsible if those decisions backfire. Just because you like the family or you like the child or you can see this child in this family doesn't mean the child and family involved feel the same way. Why not let the decisions be made by those whose lives are the most directly affected by those decisions?

I hear arranged marriages are nice. Eventually, they say, many of the people involved finally grow to love each other. I assume this is true...but, personally, I prefer to fall in love!

What is the fear? That families cannot make wise decisions? That families do not know what they can handle...or want to handle? That children can't pick out families where they feel a degree of comfort and attraction from the onset? What is the fear?

Many agencies have parties or events where they bring prospective families and children together in an informal setting so that they can meet each other and, perhaps, "fall

in love." These events can work well... if the agency listens to the voices of the parents and children and really lets the placement occur. Often, however, this doesn't happen because the agency feels that even though these people "choose" each other, in the agency's opinion the "match" isn't a good one! Then why the party or event in the first place?

When families, who have been through a preparation process, choose children (and/or children choose families), they are much more likely to make it work and to work at making it work than if workers make the choices for them. There is something that attracted them to each other — perhaps something very intangible — that overrides many of the factors they may have felt they initially couldn't accept. They begin to invest. They learn what it might be like to live with the realities of this very real child who has now materialized for them in a form much more personal than a page in an exchange book. They have begun the crucial "claiming" process.

Interestingly, exchange books themselves were a tool first developed by adoptive families to serve children trapped in a system that had declared them "unadoptable" and to get those children homes. All it took was making these "invisible children" visible to parents who "fell in love." The books were and are almost miraculous! When parents look through them and see the real children who are available, they begin to stretch and grow in their decision-making. Perhaps they thought they only wanted one child — but they see a group of three that they keep coming back to, and find themselves planning more bedroom space and looking at larger cars.

Perhaps she thought she could only take a child under 7 — but that 10-year-old reminded her of herself at that age. After all, a 7-year-old will be 10 years old someday anyhow! A good parent preparation course encourages prospective parents to look at all possible varieties, ages and problem areas of children available and encourages them to learn more about themselves and their responses to the realities of waiting children... allowing their areas of acceptance to grow and expand.

Hopefully, children are also being prepared in how to meet possible families. One agency called me about a child in their care. She had been available for years. Finally, someone had indicated an interest and she had begun visits with that family. However, miracle of miracles had taken place and the agency

recently had had another family inquiring about her. This family, in their estimation, was better suited for her and would provide better for her future. What should they do? Should they stop visits with family #1 and start visits with family #2? My reply was, "Ask the child." "Ask the child?! Why?" "Why not?" They finally did ask the child. She really liked family #1 and wanted to be part of their family. She had no desire to meet family #2. Placement occurred... and the child felt a real investment in that placement. Someone had listened to her voice!

To let decision-making happen, as it naturally will, and to feel good about the process, agencies must work with their prospective families and waiting children toward that goal. Backing off and letting decision-making occur without preparing for it and supporting it can be very problematic. Agencies, parents, and potential adopted people (when possible) need to be working together to allow decision-making to naturally occur and then to follow through on the mutual decisions. Adoptive parents must advocate for appropriate support and the right to participate in and make their own lifetime decisions. Don't let the UNTHINKABLE become your reality. The ultimate decision-maker SHOULD and MUST be YOU!

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